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ABSTRACT

Historical and realistic bases account for hostility to the concept of evaluation on the part of nursery school teachers. The nursery school is primarily a middle-class institution and as such does not attempt to provide an intellectually stimulating environment, since that is already available at home. Other sources of opposition to evaluation are its linkage to "accountability" and differences in value systems and specific goals. New approaches to preschool education now make the role of evaluation even more critical, and there are ways in which it can serve the teacher, such as making her aware of the most effective methods of teaching for specific types of children. Evaluation is further important in the parent-participation programs and in meeting legislative requirements. Differences in kinds of evaluative data and in ways in which information can be collected are widespread, but concern should be with improving the relevance of evaluation as well as its technology. (LH)

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Evaluation in Early Childhood Education[1]

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Associated with a recent press for "accountability" and "performance contracting" there has been a pervasive and even open hostility to the entire concept of evaluation. While this attitude is now prevalent among elementary educators, it produces the greatest amount of surplus adrenalin in nursery school teachers.

There are both historical and realistic bases for this reaction. The nursery school in this country is primarily a middle-class institution. Its growth has paralleled the decline in the size of the extended family; to a major extent the focus has been on socialization, peer interaction, and other important aspects of social-emotional development. For the nursery school teacher, the main concern has been nurturance, and the development of the young child is seen as analogous to the natural unfolding of a delicate flower. Extending the matephor, the nursery school provides the sun and rain and other nurtients essential for growth, but leaves it to each individual flower to absorb what it needs, according to its own inherent structure.

Parents who could afford to send their children to the private nursery school were also able to provide an intellectually stimulating environment at home--what Strodtbeck has aptly labelled the "hidden curriculum." Poor children did not attend nursery school. If their parents were working, or if special traumatic conditions were present in the home, the children were placed under custodial care. These day care settings, usually supervised by the department of social welfare, were little less sterile than the child's own home. Even today, the basic criteria for licensing day care facilities are concerned primarily with ensuring a safe physical environment.

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[1] This paper has been based on a talk given at the Conference on Early Childhood Education, Marina del Rey, California. The Articulation group is concerned with integrating two-year courses in Early Childhood given in Community Colleges, with B.A. degree programs in four-year institutions.

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A second source of opposition to evaluation has been its linkage to "accountability," another emotionally-charged word in the preschool teacher's lexicon. In essence, many teachers feel that they are the ones who are being evaluated. Thus, if the children fail to meet the national norms they will be rated as poor teachers and their job security will be threatened. While this fear undoubtedly underlies some of the opposition to evaluation, it probably operates at a subconscious level.

There is a close relationship between the fear of being labeled incompetent and a third source of opposition, the basic difference in value systems. Nursery school teachers value social and emotional growth rather than the acquisition of specific academic skills. Parenthetically, there is a notable discrepancy between the goals of teachers of disadvantaged children and those of the parents of the children they teach. In general, those parents who are most keen to have their children get the opportunities from which they themselves were excluded are extremely insistent that there be emphasis on acquisition of preacademic skills. As a matter of fact, many members of the poverty community view the reluctance to provide this type of curriculum as another subtle technique for ensuring that their children will have little chance to compete for the higher paying jobs, which require more extensive educational preparation.

A fourth basis for opposition to evaluation stems from the fact that the highest priority goals of preschool teachers are primarily in the affective domain. The relevant goals, if they are operationalized at all, are expressed in such terms as constructive peer-relationships, trust in adults, interest in learning, curiosity, creativity, aesthetic appreciation, and positive self concept. Accordingly, the curriculum is apt to stress dramatic play, finger-painting, and other non-academic activities. A second area which receives a great deal of emphasis, finding theoretical support from such diverse sources as Piaget and Montessori, is that of motor-skill development. To achieve goals in this area, a great deal of use is made of materials such as puzzles, pegs, beads and interlocking blocks for small muscle development, and bikes, wagons, slides, jungle gyms, etc., for large muscle development. When any cognitive learning does occur it is purely coincidental.

Resistance to the specification of objectives for preschool education permeated most nursery schools until the early 60's. At that time the war on poverty precipitated a revolution in the thinking on early childhood education. The 1962 review by William Fowler had pulled together convincing evidence that young children not only could learn but actually enjoyed learning. Bloom's book, published in 1964, dramatized the critical importance of the early years in laying the basis for optimum intellectual development, and Bernstein's language deficit hypothesis inspired explorations in infant stimulation by prominent psychologists (e.g. Bruner, Kagan, White, etc.).

All these diverse influences, to varying degrees, conjoined to inject a new demand, on the part of middle-class parents, for more effective academic preparation. As a result, the decade of the 60's saw a polarization of approaches in preschool education. Although there were many preschool settings which represented various points along the continuum, the two extremes might be loosely described as the child development model (e.g. Bank Street) and the structured, language-drill model (e.g. Bereiter-Engelmann). In any case, the tendency was to take an either-or stance, stressing the importance of one type of growth vs. the other.

The advent of the 70's has seen what may be considered a rapproachement between the two opposing extremes. The increasing awareness of the integral interactions between positive affect and achievement has made it apparent that it is almost impossible to produce either without the other. Recent receptivity to such innovations as experimental schools, open classrooms, British Infant Schools (as one of the several models in the Head Start Planned Variations study) and Wilson Riles' advocacy of schooling for the 4-to-8-year-old, with cross-age mixing and tutoring, indicate the acceptance of the importance of concurrent and reinforcing emphases between the two fundamental areas of early development.

In these new approaches the role of evaluation is more critical than ever. Since a basic orientation is to consider the needs of the individual child, it is essential to be able to assess the developmental level the child has achieved with reference to what may be considered the norm for that age group. Within this framework, evaluation is essential for diagnosis and prescription, not prediction nor comparison of one group against another.

Often adults oppose evaluation because they feel that children should not be "subjected" to testing. While there are undoubtedly many instances in which poorly trained or insensitive testers have been overzealous and prescriptive in administering various assessment measures, it would be unfortunate to condemn a technique because of the ineptness of the technician. Properly presented, the normal healthy child requires little urging to "show off" all the things he knows and the tricks he can do.

A second way in which evaluation can serve the teacher is to increase her effectiveness by making her aware of what approaches or styles of teaching are apt to work best with what types of children. Thus evaluation can be perceived as a teacher tool, rather than as a basis for punitive administrative action.

Perhaps one of the most characteristic features of recent evaluation programs with young children is the inclusion of family and home variables. Different kinds of child-rearing styles, encountered before entering preschool, can be expected to make important differences in how the child progresses in school. Also, the attitudes of the parents in terms of powerlessness and alienation, especially among poverty populations, can make a crucial difference in how the child views school achievement, and the degree to which he is motivated to succeed at school tasks.

Most preschool programs today have accepted the assumption that parents should play decision-making roles in determining the type of school experience their children receive. Thus it is an important function of evaluation to assess the extent to which this is actually happening, and furthermore, whether participation is making any difference in the parents' behavior, both in terms of improved child-rearing techniques and strengthened feelings of destiny control.

Finally, evaluation is essential to meet legislative requirements which are part of all publicly funded programs. Budget committees and legislators want to know whether the millions of dollars spent on innovative educational programs can be expected to provide some type of meaningful return in the foreseeable future. While the concept of accountability has generated a great deal of hostility, especially when unreasonable demands for monthly assessments are made, it could conceivably serve as a corrective feedback mechanism, of value to both teachers and children.

Just as there are many needs served by evaluation, so there are many different kinds of evaluative data, and many ways in which information can be collected. A first caution is one which has been touched on earlier: that is, evaluation must be consonant with the objectives or goals of the particular curriculum. One of the greatest problems in the evaluation of preschool programs is that so often the tests used have absolutely no relationship with the expressed goals. To avoid inappropriate evaluations, however, it is the obligation of the teacher to clarify and explicate the behaviors she is attempting to inculcate; that is, to state what overt behaviors she will accept as evidence that the child has achieved the implicit goals of the program. For some reason, nursery school teachers are extremely hostile to any request for behavioral or operational definitions. At a recent conference of early childhood educators, a workshop was addressed to the question: What do you expect children to learn at different stages of development? However there was no attempt on the part of the participants to come to grips with this question. One brave soul did venture to ask for guidelines as to specific descriptions or developmental schedules, and was met first with the wholesale condemnation of all such checklists because they were apt to be misused by unqualified examiners, and secondly with the elitist retort to the effect that any teacher worth her salt knows "intuitively" just where her children are at, what they already know, and what they are ready to learn. Further evidence of the general hostility to precision in explicating goal behavior is reflected in the indignation which is aroused at any mention of the need to develop behavioral objectives for preschool programs.

In the past, the most prevalent type of assessment utilized direct performance on more or less standard tests of ability, general achievement, or specific subject matter skills, with particular emphasis on language, reading, and mathematics. Dissatisfaction with direct testing of children under artificial and frightening conditions, using tests which have been standarized on populations of middle-class children, has led to a generalized rejection of all testing. There has been a trend away from direct testing of children to the use of objective observational systems, in which the frequency of occurrence of specific behaviors are tallied. The Office of Economic Opportunity has recently designed a study to compare the type of information produced by the two techniques.

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Hopefully this investigation will provide valid, reliable and acceptable ways of assessing changes in children under different program auspices. In brief, the concern should be with improving the relevance of evaluation as well as its technology. Once stripped of its threatening, bogey-man façade, evaluation can prove to be an important aid to the teacher, rather than the villian in the preschool classroom.